

God and the World

The Church and the "Godless World" – 3

By Thomas Merton

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The Bonhoeffer-Robinson school holds that the Christian should adopt the contemporary view that God is dead, be an adult, forget religiousness and inward piety, build the secular city, because in so doing he will be *closer to God*. Can we say that this view seems implicitly to be based on a choice between God and man? Is this school simply asking: "If we are forced to choose between an arid, formalistic faith in God 'out there' and a dynamic, creative love of man here and now, we will forsake the idea of God and choose man. In so doing, we believe that we will really be closer to God, in his absolute hiddenness, for he has emptied himself to become man and is manifesting himself *only* in man." This choice is not without its admirable features. It prefers reality and risk to security and abstract formulations. It is depressed by a religiosity that argues interminably about God in Heaven and shows no concern for man on earth. This religiosity, faced by the same implicit choice, seems to say: "If we are forced to choose between sinful man, his perversity, his greed, his lust, and the eternal Father in heaven, we will certainly turn our backs on man's wickedness and prostrate ourselves before the Father."

However, both these choices are misled, because there is in fact no such division in Christianity. It is not a matter of *either* God *or* man, but of finding God by loving man, and discovering the true meaning of man in our love for God. Neither is possible without the other. Hence the Council does not agree that we can appreciate the dignity and adulthood of man only if we decide for him and against God. The dignity and freedom of man, says the Church, remain abortive or deformed without an authentic, conscious faith in God. "When a divine substructure and the hope of life eternal are wanting, man's dignity is most grievously lacerated, as current events often attest" (n. 21). Hence the Church appeals not to dogma alone but to common sense and to the universal experience of our times. We would certainly be foolish to take an idyllic view of godlessness when its results have been, and are, so obvious and so terrible. The Church will continue therefore to teach that the love of man is insecure and elusive unless it proceeds from the hidden action of God's love and grace. The love of God is the source of all living and authentic love for other men.

Our long discussion of "religionless Christianity" has been necessary because it is very relevant to what we will discuss later on as the "diaspora situation" of contemporary Christians.

But not all modern thought outside Christianity is "godless." There is also at work an anguished hunger for God which stops short of Christianity since it feels that the ordinary Christian view of God is lifeless and conventional. It seeks to "create" a new symbolic language for the things of God.

Rilke is in many ways a typical witness of a certain type of modern religious consciousness. He

was not “godless.” His heritage was profoundly catholic and yet like so many contemporaries he found much that he could not accept in ordinary Catholic belief and practice. Less Catholic than Péguy, for instance, less Manichaean than Simone Weil, his poetic consciousness adopted a symbolic and spiritual idea of historic cycles in religious vitality. One age finds God in simplicity. The next “builds temples” for him. The next finds the temples empty and removes the stones of the temples to build houses for men. Then comes another generation which seeks God anew. Rilke thought of himself (at least when he wrote the *Book of Hours*) as a hidden God-seeker in a world when the temples stood empty and half-destroyed. For him, man must now look *to the future* to find God who would manifest himself in the history that is to come, not in a new revelation but in a creative effort of man that would make the cosmos once more “transparent.” Once again men would be able to see God in his world. This has something in common with the worldliness of Bonhoeffer and of Teilhard de Chardin, and it also appeals to those Christians whose consciousness has been influenced by a Marxist world-view. For Rilke, art itself had a cosmic, religious and prophetic dimension. For the others, science assumes this function. I do not pause to analyze these ideas theologically. I just point to the fact that they are characteristic of the contemporary mind. In fact, Bonhoeffer is very popular today among Christians of the Communist countries. He is probably better read and understood in East than in West Germany. But let us note in passing that Teilhard de Chardin is the one Catholic thinker of our time who is most fully appreciated, even by non-Christians and Marxists, in the Communist countries.

Mention of Teilhard is of course inevitable in any discussion of the Church and the modern world. No matter what may be the ambiguities of his doctrine (which I have no intention of analyzing here), it is incontestable that Teilhard de Chardin has done more than any other Christian to express a deep and living Christian experience in the language of the modern scientific world-view.

In particular he has repeatedly denied that Christians must disparage and reject the world of matter and of science in the name of Christ. On the contrary, the heart of his message is that “in the name of our faith we have the right and the duty to become passionate about the things of the earth.” Of course even the “scientific world-view” of Teilhard is limited. We must not credit him with scientific omniscience, or with speaking in the name of *every* science. Teilhard was a palaeontologist and his insights on evolution are proper to his own study of prehistoric man. They need to be completed by the work of other scientists. But the value of Teilhard is this – he is a Catholic scientist who has given other scientists something to work on – and has opened their eyes to Christian perspectives. If in so doing he has run into criticism both as a scientist and as a theologian, this does not alter the fact that his writings point the way to a new and important horizon in Christian spirituality. Here far more than in the “God-is-dead” theologians we have a Christian believer, indeed thought by some to be a mystic, who can speak the language of contemporary man without totally compromising his faith in God and in Christ. The respect which he has received in scientific circles, even more among atheists, clearly shows that it is *not* necessary to cry that God is dead before one can get a hearing for the Christian message in the contemporary world.

The name of Teilhard was mentioned more than once in the Council debate on “Schema XIII” and there is no question that the decree itself at times takes on his now familiar tone. We are not surprised that Pope Paul himself is reported to have said (to Cardinal Feltrin), “Teilhard is an indispensable man for our times; his expression of the faith is necessary for us.”

True, there is still much opposition to the doctrine of Teilhard. But as so often happens, the repressive attempt to silence a voice to which men are eager to respond has only resulted in a more passionate response, and Teilhard has become the symbol of the new Catholic outlook upon the

modern world. The very ardor of the devotion to Teilhard and the fervor with which so many have simply identified with him emotionally and spiritually have tended to throw him into a false perspective. But scholars like de Lubac are there to restore the balance, while remaining extremely favorable to Teilhard.

This earnest attempt to express the Christian faith in the language of modern science can surely not be despised, and Teilhard's voice is by now too familiar ever to be silenced. Even those who have never read him – indeed some of his opponents – will be found echoing his language, which has already become common property.

We need more such voices, because we must frankly accept the fact that we live in a culture which, for all the Christian elements that still survive in it, is essentially atheistic. The technological humanism of the modern world has built a civilization in which God and religion may at best be tolerated, but in which the prevalent world-view simply excludes God. So true is this that, as we have seen, one cannot seem to be fully contemporary without concurring in this refusal of God (Bonhoeffer attempts to adjust to the refusal without making it himself). But just as the religious refusal of "the world" is ambiguous, so the world's refusal of God and of Christ is even more ambiguous still.

It is a truism to say that the "god" supposedly demolished in atheistic reasoning is no god at all. This straw god is in fact a contingent, limited, fallible, powerless object, a thing among things, at the very best a counterfeit. Such a "god" has no right whatever to exist, but the atheist has very little reason to be proud for seeing this. Yet if he persists in thinking that he has really made a discovery in proving the nonexistence of this shadow, it is probably because so many religious people – indeed so many religious books – give the impression that such a shadowy or limited being is indeed the God of religious faith. It is unfortunately true that for many "believers" the God they believe in is not the living God but an apologetic hypothesis.

There is no need to go into the question of proofs for the existence of God here. It is enough to say that the whole apologetic venture of proving that God exists can become quite ambiguous, as when apologetes pretend to demonstrate his existence by the kind of reasoning used in science. That is to say, they prove a hypothesis. But the whole question of God is situated in an entirely different order, and the thoughtless apologete who makes him a hypothesis to begin with, tends by that very fact to make his existence *less* credible.

The mere fact of treating God as a hypothesis amounts to treating him as an existent which might or might not exist – as a *possibility*. But to begin with God as a *possibility* is to start on a road that leads away from him, since the whole meaning of "God" is that of *necessary* and *absolute* subsisting Being – a Being whose *essence is to exist*. To take God as a possibility that might exist and then say he *does* in fact exist is to prove nothing whatever.

There is a great deal of truth in Bonhoeffer's argument that God is a hypothesis which science does not need. That is to say that since God is in fact entirely outside and other than the physical and material order of existing things, he who investigates that order can validly do so without any knowledge of God. But if the hypothesis of God's existence is irrelevant to science as such, then the hypothesis of his nonexistence is equally irrelevant. Modern man who tries to live and think *solely* in terms of science can therefore ignore the question of God as long as he is, in fact, living *solely* in terms of science. The question that immediately arises, however, is this: can man live *solely* in terms of science and be fully human? The Church has always answered "no" to such a question. The depths of man's being, his personal capacity for wisdom, freedom and love, are not satisfied with a merely quantitative and empirical view of life, restricted to matter alone. Man's deepest and most

essential potentialities remain stunted, deprived and unfulfilled in a world without value and without spirit – a world merely of numbers and of machinery.

On the other hand, there is no use in trying to fulfil these possibilities by bringing in God as a kind of supreme machine – or as the supreme mechanic – as if his essence were not only knowable to the scientist but relevant to physics. In fact this kind of argument implicitly posits God as a physical object and then argues from other objects that he must exist “out there” as a physical force coordinating and governing the machinery of the universe. The classical arguments for God as the “unmoved Mover” and “uncaused Cause” are not comprehensible outside the frame of the Aristotelian world-view. Here God is never seen as *entering into a system of causes* and hence *empirically deducible*. Nor does the fact that he exists give us a clear knowledge of who or what he is.* God is completely outside the empirical and physical order of things, necessarily so, for if he were part of it he would be a limited and physical being, and hence not God. In which case, the atheist is quite right to refuse certain well-meant ideas of God as simply insufficient and incredible. No idea of God can have any value if it is not strongly *based on a metaphysical sense of Being*.

For Catholic theodicy, God is not simply one of many existents which exercises a causal influence on other existents, he is subsistent Being itself, *ens a se, ipsum esse subsistens*, and the cause of being, *causa essendi*, of all that is. This is not a physical but a metaphysical concept, and it cannot be understood unless one first has some insight into *being* as distinct from the flux of existents and from cosmic processes. To remove the question of God from the realm of metaphysics into that (at least implicitly) of the physics of motion and quantitative change is to give atheists every reason to deride our arguments. And yet curiously enough it is modern thought itself which now seeks God as immanent in the process of evolution.

The celebrated argument of St Anselm, wrongly called the “ontological argument”** in his case does not start from God *as a hypothesis* and then argue that because we can have a hypothesis of a highest being therefore there must be a highest being. It starts, on the contrary, from a *religious and metaphysical insight into the nature of Being, of ultimate reality as grasped by intuition in and through our own metaphysical ground*. From which reality it argues an infinite Being, not as an object situated at the end of a long line of other objects, but as the non-objective or trans-objective source and justification of Being as such and of all existing beings.

The strength and weakness of Anselm’s argument lies precisely in the deep religious intuition which is at its starting-point. Karl Barth saw this clearly, in his sympathetic analysis of Anselm, and the Orthodox theologian Evdokimov has been equally impressed by it. For Anselm, God is precisely the One for whom existence is *not* a “possibility.” Hence he does not argue, as some seem to think, that because God is possible he is necessary. On the contrary, it is the other way round. Because God is necessary, everything else is possible. Duns Scotus was to bring this out more clearly later. From

* “Since God is first from all points of view and with respect to all the rest, he cannot enter into composition with anything else. The cause of all other beings can enter into composition with none of them. Consequently, God is simple. His simplicity itself has many consequences. Because corporeal bodies are in potency with respect to both motion and being, they are not simple; hence God cannot be corporeal. For the same reason, since he is pure act, God is not composed of matter and form. He is not even a subject endowed with its own form, essence or nature. Divinity is something that God *is*, not that he *has*. (Cf. S.T. I, 3, 1-3; C.G. I, 20.) But what is such a being which *is* all that he can be said to be, and *has* nothing? He is *who is*. Since God *is* what other beings only *have*, there is in him no distinct essence to unite with the act of being. This unique being, the only one whose whole essence it is ‘to be,’ is so perfectly simple that it is its own being (S.T. I, 3, 4; C.G. I, 22.)” (Etienne Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, p. 371.)

**The term “ontological argument” may apply more correctly to the similar arguments of Descartes and Kant.

the moment anything is “in Being” or shares being by its existence, there is actual being; and if there is limited actuality, there must be *pure* actuality. That pure actuality, necessary being that *cannot not be*, is what we call God. Thus Anselm is, in his own way, a kind of empiricist: he adduces evidence that is for him empirical, but it is not laboratory evidence. It is his personal intuition of being as opening out into infinite actuality. It belongs to the order of religious and metaphysical experience. But it is not esoteric or even mystical: it is simply an insight which is natural to man (for man is an intelligent being with a capacity to experience the metaphysical ground of his being) – an insight which, however, belongs to the order of wisdom rather than of science.

Though this capacity for sapiential insight is natural to man, it can be dulled or totally lost when one is subjected to certain cultural influences, and it happens that our own particular culture, centered on mechanical and quantitative thinking, is especially unfavorable for the development of metaphysical insight. Lacking this sense of being, it is small wonder that modern man is so easily lost in the shallow optimism of a purely quantitative and positivistic outlook, or in the despair of an existent that is not aware that it has any ground of being and therefore any reason for existing.

The Constitution on the Church in the World takes a middle course between these two kinds of worldliness: the scientific collectivist and optimistic kind (still favored by the Marxists) and the despairing existentialist atheism which flourishes in the decay of Western individualism and culture.

The unlimited confidence in science, so characteristic of the nineteenth century, and sometimes disavowed by the major scientists of the twentieth, is reflected in the statement of the Soviet biologist Pavlov (in the nineteen-twenties): “Only science, exact science about human nature itself and the most sincere approach to it by the aid of the omnipotent scientific method, will deliver man from his present gloom and will purge him from his contemporary shame in the sphere of human relationships.” This very unscientific statement about science is typical of a certain popular mythology which has attained the status of a dogma in Communist thought. Here we have an example of what one might call a materialistic soteriology of science. Science is not only infallible, omnipotent, but it *saves*. Saves from what? Why, gloom of course! Man is gloomy because at present he does not have all the things that would make him happy. And it saves from “shame in the sphere of human relationships,” that is from economic and social injustice. There is no question that man needs salvation from this “shame” and there is no question that the Council has shown a healthy respect for the part science *must play* in the work of creating a just and equitable society: yet to regard the “omnipotent scientific method” as the only savior in this or any other realm is pure superstition. Indeed one of the most important factors in our present world crisis is the incapacity of science to solve our most urgent human problems by itself. There is no doubt that if scientific methods were *applied* more wisely to the solution of these problems, they would be extremely useful. But science, left to itself, cannot apply itself to this task. This requires a moral and metaphysical wisdom which is above science and which we sadly lack: left to itself and to its own “laws” science only gets us more and more involved in the unutterable complexities and inhumanities of war, violence, exploitation, and cruelty to our fellow man even when we earnestly seek to help him.*

* Of course there are scientists who are also *wise* men and judge by the light of their wisdom. Such judgments are superior to those of science.